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Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 24 January 1996, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. CORTI

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

REPORT OF THE CHAIRPERSON ON THE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BETWEEN THE FOURTEENTH AND THE FIFTEENTH SESSIONS OF THE COMMITTEE AND CONSIDERATION OF THE REPORT OF THE SIXTH MEETING OF PERSONS CHAIRING THE HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODIES AND ACTION TAKEN BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY CONCERNING TREATY BODIES (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Combined initial and second periodic reports of Iceland (continued) (CEDAW/C/ICE/1-2)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Asgeirsdottir and Ms. Thorkelsdottir (Iceland) took places at the Committee table.

2. Ms. ASGEIRSDOTTIR (Iceland), replying to questions asked by members of the Committee, said that the request for more statistical information and for information on non-governmental organizations had been noted; information would be provided in the next report.

3. Human rights instruments ratified by Iceland did not automatically become part of national legislation. However, the European Convention on Human Rights had been incorporated into the country's national legislation. Iceland did not intend to incorporate the Convention into Icelandic law, since the authorities felt that the recent changes to the Constitution and the 1991 Law on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men were adequate in that respect.

4. Iceland's report had not been published. Two of the largest women's organizations in Iceland were represented on the Equal Status Council, which had been formally invited to comment on the draft report.

5. In December 1995, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had invited the Nordic and Baltic countries to a seminar on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in a national, Nordic and international context. No decisions had as yet been taken about implementation in Iceland. The publication in Icelandic of an abridged version of the Platform for Action, concentrating on the chapters relevant to Iceland, was being considered. The Four-Year Plan of Action for Measures to Establish Equality between Women and Men, to be adopted in 1997, would no doubt be influenced by the Platform for Action.

6. Ms. THORKELSDOTTIR (Iceland) said that the Four-Year Plan of Action for 1991-1995 had been drawn up without input from Parliament. In 1993, as a result of the adoption of the Law on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men, the Plan of Action had been amended because of the new requirement that it be adopted by Parliament. The current Plan of Action, for 1993-1997, was currently being evaluated. The Minister for Social Affairs would submit an evaluation report and possible amendments, which would have to be adopted by Parliament. The Plan of Action was based on proposals from the different ministries, and each ministry was answerable to Parliament and the public for it sector.

7. The Complaints Committee dealt with sex discrimination cases, mostly concerning the labour market. Cases of violence against women were police matters. The Complaints Committee could initiate legal proceedings to secure compensation. The cost of such proceedings was covered by the Government. It

was true that only a few equal pay cases had been brought before the Complaints Committee, but such cases could not always be resolved at the individual level; general measures were needed. The small size of Iceland's population was also a factor. There were no current plans to establish an equality ombudsman, but the idea had been put forward on several occasions.

8. The Icelandic authorities were currently considering a number of ways and means of ensuring equal pay for women. In March 1995, a special committee had been set up by the Minister for Social Affairs to deal with the problem, and had focused mainly on job evaluation. Under its policy platform, the Government was committed to according priority to equal pay.

9. On the question of temporary special measures to ensure equality between the sexes, in addition to the Four-Year Plan of Action, there were various projects dealing with women in rural areas. The special women's loan guarantee fund to enable women to start their own businesses had been established in 1995, so that it was not yet possible to provide additional information.

10. Very few men had actually taken parental leave, possibly because they derived their right to such leave from the mother's maternity leave; the law was currently being revised to ensure men an independent right to paternity leave.

11. The Equal Status Council consisted of seven members appointed after each parliamentary election. The Minister for Social Affairs appointed the chairperson, and the other members were appointed by employers', workers' and women's organizations. The Council's main function was to serve as an advisory body to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Office of the Council was a government agency; it supported the Complaints Committee, an independent body, and operated as a national centre for information on equality matters. The Council did not have a separate budget, but the office did.

12. The new law on compensation for victims of violence would not go into effect until mid-1996; information on its implementation would be provided in a future report.

13. Ms. ASGEIRSDOTTIR (Iceland) said that no educational programmes on human rights and international conventions were currently organized for judges, but that the idea would be put to the Ministry of Justice. The Four-Year Plan of Action did prescribe special courses for the police.

14. Under the Law on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men, advertisers had to ensure that advertisements were in no way derogatory or humiliating to either sex. There was active cooperation between the Equal Status Council and the Union of Advertising Agencies. One article of the code of practice for advertising agencies was concerned with sex stereotypes.

15. The Women's Shelter was run by non-governmental organizations, but financed by the State (60 per cent) and by municipalities. There were no plans for the State to run such a shelter.

16. The maximum penalty for rape was 16 years. The number of rapes was not proportionately higher than in neighbouring countries, but every case of rape was regarded as a very serious matter.

17. Women constituted 21 per cent of lower court judges and 11 per cent of Supreme Court judges. The proportion of women graduating from the Faculty of Law of the University of Iceland had increased from 13 per cent in 1975 to 54 per cent in 1989. A woman judge of the Supreme Court had been the first chairperson of the Equal Status Council.

18. The target of 30 per cent representation of women in public committees was set in the Four-Year Plan of Action. According to the Law on Equal Status and Equal Rights, an approximately equal number of women and men had to be appointed to those committees. So far, that provision had not proved very effective, but there had been no political majority in support of proposals to strengthen it.

19. The Women's Party had entered the political scene in 1983, when three of its candidates had been elected to Parliament, but it had never been in office. Its platform described the party as being neither to the left nor the right, but a feminist party.

20. Iceland had provided detailed information and statistics on education in its national report to the Fourth World Conference on Women. Over a very short period, the number of women graduating from universities had surpassed the number of men. Women accounted for 73 per cent of teachers at the compulsory level, but 72 per cent of headmasters were men.

21. A women's studies centre had been established at the University of Iceland in 1990. It carried out research and distributed information on women's studies and cooperated with other such centres in Iceland and abroad. Its board consisted of six women, each appointed for a two-year term. Iceland was a member of the Nordic Institute for Women and Gender Studies, founded in 1995.

22. One of the tasks of the working group within the Ministry of Education was to study equal rights education in schools. Several projects had been initiated for teaches and students. The question of special projects for women re-entering the labour market had been discussed in Iceland, but it was felt that available courses covered the needs that existed. Special attention was being given to the unemployed, and there was a pilot project aimed specifically at unemployed women with little formal education. The length of the school day in compulsory education was four to six hours. Most municipalities offered children under the age of nine the possibility of spending the whole day at school.

23. The latest statistics on women and employment would be provided in the next report. The total unemployment rate for women was higher than that for men. According to the Statistical Bureau of Iceland, the unemployment rate among women in 1994 had been 10.1 per cent for the 16-24 year age group and 4.8 per cent for the 25-64 year age group. The unemployment rate for women was 6 per cent in rural areas, 5.2 per cent in small towns and 5.6 per cent in the Reykjavik area. It appeared that women with small children did not have a lower rate of participation in the labour force. According to statistics for 1992,

65.8 per cent of women between the ages of 20 and 29 participated in the labour market, 77.1 per cent of those between 30 and 39, 89 per cent of those between 40 and 49, 85.1 per cent of those between 50 and 59 and 62.9 per cent of those between 60 and 69. It should be noted that part of the 20 to 29 age group was pursuing higher education, and that the fertility rate among Icelandic women was one of the highest in Europe.

24. Regarding the length of the working week, it should be borne in mind that, despite its small population, Iceland had to maintain the same infrastructure as neighbouring countries; that required the active participation of the entire population. Although there was some unemployment, that had not relieved the heavy workload in many sectors. Part-time workers were mostly married women; men worked longer hours outside the home, more and more men, especially younger men, were objecting to long working hours.

25. It could be assumed that single parents worked full time. In order to enable them to participate fully in the labour force, preschool centres gave priority to children of single parents. It was still not possible for the municipalities to offer preschool places to every child.

26. The main trade unions were participating in the working group on job evaluation, which was in the process of presenting its first report.

27. No studies had been made to evaluate unpaid work. Some women's organizations had felt that such studies might have a negative effect. There had been no studies on the reasons for women's increased participation in the labour force either. However, financial independence for women was seen as one of the basic factors of equality, and the level of education among women had risen in the past decade. Moreover, two breadwinners were often needed, particularly among unskilled workers, bearing in mind also the relatively large size of families in Iceland.

28. On the question of minimum wages, employers and employees negotiated wage rates. The law prescribed that wage agreements between the parties must be respected and that the agreed wages and other terms must be regarded as minimum rates, regardless of the sex, nationality or term of appointment of wage-earners in the relevant occupation. Contracts made between individual wage-earners and employers on less favourable terms than those specified in the general wages and terms agreement were null and void.

29. Women's groups had pointed out that one of the explanations for the difference in salaries between men and women was that women's jobs were undervalued. The job evaluation project would determine whether traditional women's jobs were evaluated at a lower level than comparable work carried out by men. More information would be provided in future reports.

30. Part-time workers were entitled to the same holidays and paid sick leave as full-time workers and received proportional pay and salary-based benefits according to their working hours; thus, they were not discriminated against. In order to receive unemployment benefits, an individual had to have worked for a minimum period. Women, whether employed or not, received six-months' maternity

allowance; additional daily maternity benefits were granted to all employed women and were higher for women who had held full-time jobs.

31. Up to the end of 1994, a total of 91 individuals had been diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in Iceland; 14 women and 77 men; 16 per cent were heterosexual. The rate of new cases was 13.2 per 100,000 inhabitants. The number of cases had not risen as fast as had been expected. Information on acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and modes of transmission was provided in schools and workplaces.

32. There were no statistics on drug abuse for Iceland as a whole. According to information from the largest drug treatment clinic, about one third of those who received treatment for drug abuse and alcoholism were women. For both men and women, the largest age group was between 20 and 40 years of age. Problems related to drug abuse and alcoholism were dealt with very openly in Icelandic society. Special attention was given to women and their needs, and since 1995 the clinic had offered women special treatment in women's groups.

33. Concerning mental health, 5.4 per cent of persons hospitalized in Iceland were diagnosed as mentally disturbed. Up to the age of 65, the majority were men because alcoholism, which was included in that category, was more common among men, but after the age of 65, women were more prone to mental disturbance than men.

34. In 1992, the abortion rate had been 12.4 per 1,000. There was no limit on how many abortions a woman could have. Abortions took place in hospitals and were performed free of charge. Contraceptives were not provided free of charge.

35. According to the Director-General for Health, medical research was not sex segregated unless that was deemed necessary, for example, if an increase in a particular disease was noted specifically among men or among women. An Icelandic cancer registry had been in operation since 1954. All women over 25 years of age were invited to undergo cancer screening every two or three years, depending on age.

36. Foreign citizens accounted for 2 per cent of the total population of Iceland, and increased attention had been given to immigrant women in recent years. Whereas, in the past, most immigrants had originated in Europe, the majority now came from Asia. The Ministry of Social Affairs had issued a leaflet entitled "Icelandic Law and Icelandic Society", aimed primarily at women and the Ministry of Education had increased its emphasis on teaching Icelandic to new immigrants and on providing special courses which were attended jointly by immigrant mothers and their children. When an immigrant woman first visited a health clinic, she was informed of the services available. An interpreter was available, although most women preferred to bring along a family member or friend, and the children of recent immigrants saw the same doctor each time they visited a clinic.

37. Statistics on mortality were provided in appendix 4, which had been circulated.

38. The Icelandic Government recognized the special problems of rural women and had taken special measures to improve their situation, as indicated in the Four-Year Plan of Action for Measures to Establish Equality between Women and Men. The oral presentation of the initial and second periodic reports had described the special women's fund for employment, whose projects included the hiring of women employment consultants. A newsletter produced by a rural women's networking group provided information on employment opportunities. The Technological Institute of Iceland offered courses for women who wanted to start their own businesses. Appendix 5 provided population statistics; in 1994, the female population of Iceland had been 133,002, of whom 10,492 had been living in minor localities and rural areas. Employment opportunities were more limited for rural women than for urban women; fish factories, agriculture-related industries, hospitals and centres for the elderly or the handicapped provided the majority of jobs.

39. Icelandic inheritance law made no distinction between the sexes. Divorce law divided property equally between the husband and wife; in cases where custody was awarded to one parent, that parent did not receive a larger share of the communal property unless the couple agreed to it. However, the non-custodial parent paid a monthly allowance for each child, for which the Government set the minimum amount and guaranteed payment. The minimum age for marriage was 18 for both sexes, although the Ministry of Justice could grant special permission for marriage to minors who were at least 16 years of age; both parties must request such permission, the usual reason being that the couple already had or were expecting a child.

40. Husbands and wives were taxed separately and everyone over the age of 16 was entitled to a personal deduction, of which up to 80 per cent could be transferred from a non-working to a working spouse, thereby lowering the tax burden on the family. Unemployment benefits were calculated on an individual basis, without regard to the income of the spouse, although the minimum benefit was higher for married persons and a fixed sum was added for each child. Everyone over the age of 67 received a basic pension, which was supplemented for those who did not have occupational pension rights; the income of the spouse was the determining factor in whether a supplement was paid.

41. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING asked how much evidence was required from women who brought cases before the Complaints Committee. It appeared that in Iceland, the burden of proof was on the employer, which was not the case in most European countries.

42. Ms. THORKELSDOTTIR (Iceland) said that the burden of proof was on the employer and that there were no rules governing the amount of information which the woman filing the complaint must provide. To date, no case had been rejected on grounds of insufficient information. In the national courts, however, where few such cases had as yet been tried, it was for the judge to assign the burden of proof.

43. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING asked whether a woman who came to the Women's Shelter in such distress that she was unable to work, or who had no income of her own, would be entitled to welfare benefits or some other form of income support. In countries where women in that situation automatically received welfare benefits,

that had been viewed as discriminatory since not all battered women necessarily required such assistance.

44. Ms. THORKELSDOTTIR (Iceland) said she supposed that a working woman in such circumstances would take sick leave. There were various provisions for non-working women; the Shelter paid for the transportation of women from rural areas to the Shelter, and free legal advice was available. Non-working women had the right to apply to the social welfare office for assistance, which Icelandic society did not view as degrading.

45. Ms. ASGEIRSDOTTIR (Iceland) said that new social welfare services had placed the former welfare system and that they varied by municipality, of which Iceland had over 170, that was a very large number for such a small country and one case of domestic violence could place a great financial burden on a small rural municipality, but Parliament was reluctant to mandate the type of social services that must be provided. Recourse to social services was not viewed as degrading, but rather as part of the rights and obligations of all taxpayers. The social welfare offices were staffed primarily by women and had their own network of complaints bureaux.

46. Ms. ABAKA applauded the support provided for immigrant women, which was typical of the advanced attitudes of the Nordic countries. However, she felt that it would be useful to inform immigrants of acts which constituted violations in Iceland but might have been permitted in their countries of origin.

47. Ms. JAVATE DE DIOS said that she shared Ms. Abaka's concern for immigrant women, who were usually of Asian origin. She asked whether information was available on how many of those women married Icelanders, whether such marriages sometimes occurred through mail-order bride arrangements or matchmaking agencies, and whether the latter services were legal. She hoped that the next report would provide information on the measures being taken to prepare immigrant women for socio-economic integration into Icelandic society; that was particularly important in crisis situations, where immigrants were more vulnerable than Icelandic women.

48. Ms. MÄKINEN praised the Government of Iceland for organizing a follow-up seminar to the Beijing Conference, at which the Baltic countries, Greenland and the Faeroe Islands had been invited to share the experience of the Nordic countries in organizing women's machinery and implementing the Platform for Action. The presence of the President of Iceland, herself a woman, had demonstrated the country's interest in women's affairs.

49. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING said that she was pleased that women's studies were now part of the curriculum at the University of Iceland. She suggested that efforts should be made to establish a link between the women's studies centre and the teacher training programme, in an effort to translate research into practical action. The resulting improvement in attitudes towards women would filter down into the schools, making special educational projects unnecessary.

50. Ms. ASGEIRSDOTTIR (Iceland) said that, in the past 10 years, several hundred immigrants, mostly women, had come to Iceland from Asia. Many of them

had married Icelandic men, and the Government had conducted studies to determine how many such marriages were arranged by mail or through agencies. A few years previously, the immigration authorities had begun demanding proof of a prior relationship between the parties. The number of male immigrants was rising rapidly; some brought their families with them, while others had families after arriving in Iceland. The wives of such immigrants were eligible for pregnancy-related health services and child care, which tended to establish a relationship of trust. The Government had issued a leaflet on citizenship, society, government policy and other such matters but, although it was available in several languages and had been written with care, it had proved too difficult for many immigrants to understand. The Red Cross had offered several one- to two-day seminars to inform immigrants of their rights and obligations in Icelandic society, but those who most needed such information were least likely to attend and could not be forced to do so. The Red Cross had been invited to give the seminars because the Government felt that they might be better accepted if offered by a non-governmental organization. The Government was also aware of the importance of enabling immigrants to preserve their own way of life while adopting Icelandic ways; it had little experience in that area but looked to the other Nordic countries for models. Iceland, Greenland and the Faeroe Islands had set up cooperative arrangements in several fields, including women's issues.

51. Ms. THORKELSDOTTIR (Iceland) said that in 1992, Iceland had sponsored a forum for women from Iceland, Greenland and the Faeroe Islands in preparation for the Beijing Conference.

52. With regard to women's studies, she said that attempts were being made to mainstream women's issues into the work of many university departments.

53. The CHAIRPERSON said that the Committee was pleased at the thoroughness of Iceland's responses to its questions, particularly as Icelandic policy was very advanced in the field of women's affairs. Of course, it was easier to implement the Convention and take other measures to advance the status of women in a small country than in a large one, but political will was also necessary in order for change to take place. It was clear that political will was not lacking in Iceland, whose woman President remained active in the Council of Europe, one of the most advanced organizations in Europe in terms of its treatment of women's issues.

54. She was pleased that the national machinery was becoming more efficient and that Iceland was working closely with, and following the example of, the other Nordic countries. For that reason, she found it surprising that Iceland had yet to follow the Swedish example of establishing an equality ombudsman; she hoped that it would do so in the future.

55. She congratulated Iceland on its progress in the face of the economic difficulties experienced throughout Europe, and on the temporary special measures which it had implemented to improve the status of women. However, it appeared that those measures did not go far enough and that there was still resistance to the presence of women in decision-making bodies, especially in politics.

56. While women's studies were very important, she felt that now that they were established at the university level, greater emphasis should be placed on human rights education. She also felt that more attention should be given to the human rights treaty bodies. The Icelandic Government had played an active role in all recent world conferences, especially those held at Vienna, Cairo and Beijing, but despite the Government's evident commitment to human rights, the related instruments had not been incorporated into domestic legislation.

57. Ms. Asgeirsdottir and Ms. Thorkelsdottir (Iceland) withdrew.

REPORT OF THE CHAIRPERSON ON THE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BETWEEN THE FOURTEENTH AND THE FIFTEENTH SESSIONS OF THE COMMITTEE AND CONSIDERATION OF THE REPORT OF THE SIXTH MEETING OF PERSONS CHAIRING THE HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODIES AND ACTION TAKEN BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY CONCERNING TREATY BODIES (continued)

58. Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA DEL REAL, reporting on the activities of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights during 1995, and particularly on its twelfth and thirteenth sessions, said that that Committee's sessions had lasted a total of six weeks, during which it had considered the initial reports of Algeria, Mauritius, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Suriname; the second periodic report of Portugal; and the third periodic reports of Colombia, Norway, Sweden and Ukraine.

59. The Committee had also considered a detailed report on a special technical mission sent to Panama to gather information on the implementation of the right to housing, with particular reference to the consequences of the bombing which had taken place at the time of the United States invasion and to the Government's forcible eviction of squatters.

60. The Committee had adopted a General Comment on the economic, social and cultural rights of elderly people, including the special needs of elderly women, and had recommended that States parties should establish non-contributory pensions for persons who would otherwise have no pension entitlement.

61. At each of its sessions, the Committee devoted a day of general discussion to a particular topic. The topics discussed in 1995 had been the obligations of States parties under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the content of a possible optional protocol to the Covenant. No clear consensus had, however, emerged regarding the wording of the optional protocol.

62. As a result of the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women and other recent international conferences, almost all the concluding observations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights now contained a section on women's rights, emphasizing those aspects which seemed to it to run counter to the enjoyment of those rights.

63. Ms. AOUIJ said that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was of the utmost importance, especially for developing countries. The promotion of development was essential for the prevention of conflicts and the consolidation of social peace in those countries. The greatest difficulty lay in the financing of development; she wondered what international institutions

such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were doing to help countries in difficulty, especially when those countries were expected to observe international standards of respect for economic and social rights, and whether the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights took account of the difficulties of financing development activities. She requested information on the recent establishment of an ad hoc body on the right to development.

64. Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA DEL REAL expressed confidence that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was fully aware of the financial difficulties faced by developing countries in their attempts to fulfil their obligations under the Covenant. The mission to Panama had been of particular importance in that respect, and had enabled the Committee to make a number of detailed recommendations to that country's Government.

65. Ms. BARE suggested that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women might benefit from studying the work and methodologies of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the outcome of its discussions, since in many cases, reporting States invoked social and cultural rights to justify perpetuating the subordination of women in their societies.

66. Ms. AOUIJ noted that current discussions of development increasingly emphasized the importance of human resources development and the advancement of women. It was increasingly recognized that development and economic growth were inseparably linked to the issue of equal rights for women.

67. Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA DEL REAL, responding to Ms. Bare, said that the secretariats of the other human rights bodies would be asked to provide all members of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women with the concluding observations of those bodies, in cases where the States parties concerned would also be reporting to that Committee. She also hoped that Committee members would be able to receive any concluding observations of other bodies that might be relevant to its work.

68. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was concerned not only with rights such as education and social security but also, increasingly, with issues such as domestic violence, nationality, and lack of equality in marriage, showing that it interpreted economic, social and cultural rights very broadly.

The meeting rose at 12.20 p.m.